

The Education and Training Inspectorate

REPORT OF AN EVALUATION OF THE PROVISION

FOR

ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE

May 2011



CONTENTS

Section	Page
1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT	1
2. THE EVALUATION	2
3. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS	3
4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	4
5. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS	5
6. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING	6
7. CONCLUSION	8
8. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT	8
APPENDIX	

Quantitative Terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

All the statistics in this report have been supplied by the six further education colleges

Grading System

The Education and Training Inspectorate use the following performance levels in reports:

Performance Level
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1.1 In November 2010, the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) requested the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) to undertake an evaluation of essential skills provision in the workplace. Currently discrete provision for essential skills in the workplace is funded by the Department through the Union Learning Fund, the six further education colleges' own economic engagement, and the Association of Sector Skills Councils' six essential skills projects. The table below indicates the total number of learners since September 2008 who have addressed their essential skills needs through the further education colleges' own economic engagement or the Union Learning Fund. The table identifies the number of learners enrolled and indicates a positive trend in the number addressing their essential skills through the workplace. Although there was a slight decline (2%) in the overall enrolments between 2008/09 and 2009/10 the number of learners enrolled by 31 October 2010/11 is already 74% of the total 2009/10 enrolments. However, it is worth noting that there has been a decline in the number of learners enrolling for literacy and numeracy classes but, by contrast, there has been a steady increase in those enrolling for information and communication technology (ICT) classes. By 31 October 2010 the majority (64%) of all enrolments were for ICT, with literacy enrolments at 23% and numeracy making up the remaining 13%. Since 1 September 2008, enrolments across the three skill areas of ICT, literacy, and numeracy are 52%, 30% and 18% respectively.

Type of provision	1 Sept 08-31 Aug 09			1 Sept 09-31 Aug10			1 Sept-31 Oct 10			Total No. of Learners		
Colleges' Economic Engagement (EE)	358			503			400			1261		
Union Learning Fund (ULF)	507			342			223			1072		
Enrolments by skill area for EE and ULF	L 301	N 203	ICT 361	L 257	N 149	ICT 439	L 144	N 79	ICT 400	L 702	N 431	ICT 1200
Total	865			845			623			2333		

* All data was provided by the six further education colleges

1.2 It was agreed with the Department that the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils' essential skills projects developed by Goskills and Proskills, and currently funded by the Department, would also form part of the evaluation. The South West College (SWC) in conjunction with Proskills has developed initial assessment and action based materials contextualised to the extractive industries. However, at the time of the evaluation, due to prevailing economic conditions in the extractive industry, the project was experiencing difficulties in engaging employers. The Goskills project has also been very slow in engaging learners. At the time of the evaluation a small number of taxi drivers in the north west of the province were using the bite size learning opportunities mobile (BLOOM) handsets but none of these learners had progressed to essential skills classes. Goskills has explored links with the North West Regional College (NWRC) to help with the transition from using the BLOOM handsets to undertaking essential skills qualifications, and have recruited a tutor who can provide support over and above what learners can receive from the use of the handsets.

1.3 In October 2002, the Department launched its "Essential Skills for Living" strategy in response to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) of 1996 which estimated that 24% of adults in NI had difficulties with literacy and numeracy. The IALS showed that the incidence of the problem in NI was higher than in all but one of the 14 countries participating in the survey, with older age groups in the working age population performing the worst.

The aims of the “Essential Skills for Living” strategy were:

“To provide opportunities for adults to update their Essential Skills to assist them in improving their overall quality of life, personal development and their employment opportunities, and by doing so to promote greater economic development, social inclusion and cohesion.”

In 2007/8 the Department included ICT as the third essential skill.

1.4 The NI Audit Office report, “Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy”, published in 2009 identified a range of benefits for those who improve their essential skills, including a greater chance of improved quality and security of employment. The report outlines that participants who engage in essential skills classes were able to secure more highly-paid jobs with better prospects and greater sustainability. The report made a number of recommendations, including one which highlights that the Department should continue to work with local employers to provide opportunities for employees to access essential skills courses. The report noted that working with employers, especially small and medium enterprises, has proved challenging for the Department.

2. THE EVALUATION

2.1 In November 2010, an evaluation of the provision for essential skills in the workplace provided to employers by the six colleges of further education in NI through the colleges’ own economic engagement or by the Union learning Fund administered by the NI Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions took place. The aims of the evaluation were:

- to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning for essential skills learners, including the effectiveness of the use of contextualised and non-contextualised learning materials, within a range of workplace settings;
- to evaluate the achievements and outcomes for essential skills learners in the workplace, and the impact this has on the standard of their work including their ability to progress;
- to identify how effectively employers and providers work together to overcome the barriers in engaging essential skills learners in a workplace context, and to support them in the development of their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills; and
- to identify and explore how effectively flexible models of delivery (including programmes of less than 40 hours) meet both the needs of employers and learners.

2.2 During the evaluation a team of three inspectors, observed a total of 206 learners in 30 lessons from 20 employers (list of employers in the appendix), and held focus groups with 97 learners. Learners were observed in a range of settings; 121 (59%) were in their place of work, 51 (25%) in college campuses and 34 (17%) in premises other than in the colleges’ or the employers’ premises, for example, in learning centres. Extended discussions were held with college senior managers, human resources managers, area and local union learning representatives and essential skills tutors, as well as staff from Goskills and Proskills. The team also examined samples of learners’ work and portfolios of evidence.

2.3 At the time of the evaluation there were no learners registered on the Proskills essential skills project funded by the Department, and the Goskills project was at a very early stage of implementation. Given the current position of both the Goskills and Proskills projects the Inspectorate is not in a position to provide an evaluation of these projects.

3. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

3.1 The main strengths of the provision for essential skills in the workplace are the:

- flexible models of delivery and timetabling arrangements facilitated by the colleges to meet the work patterns of the employers and the learners;
- very good work of the Union Learning Representatives in promoting essential skills provision in the workplace;
- overall good retention (86%) and achievement rates (84%);
- enthusiasm and motivation of almost all of the learners in addressing their essential skills needs and their positive re- engagement in learning;
- good or better standards of work achieved by almost all learners;
- increasing numbers of employees undertaking the essential skill of ICT;
- good or better quality of most of the teaching and learning observed; and
- very good relationships developed between the tutors and almost all learners to promote a positive learning environment.

3.2 The main areas for improvement are the:

- lack of employer engagement with a significant minority of the colleges in self-evaluating their essential skills provision in the workplace;
- declining number of learners addressing their literacy and numeracy needs;
- lack of use by the colleges of the flexibility around the 40 hour rule to allow learners, where appropriate, to achieve their qualification more quickly;
- slow progress in learning for a small number of learners where the findings from initial assessment are not well matched to their learning needs;
- lack of internet access in employers' premises for the delivery of the essential skill of ICT;
- use of information and learning technology (ILT) to enhance teaching and learning where employer premises do not have internet access;
- limited use of the colleges' virtual learning environment (VLE) to allow learners to work independently at home;

- gaps in the provision in some areas of the province; and
- limited involvement by new, smaller and medium size employers in the provision of essential skills training for their employees.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 All of the colleges have provision for essential skills in the workplace but at the time of the evaluation only five colleges were providing classes. Good or better relationships have been developed by college managers with those responsible for the co-ordination of essential skills provision in the workplace. The proactive approach to the provision of essential skills in the workplace adopted by the Union Learning Representatives is pivotal to its success.

4.2 All of the colleges have worked very hard to provide flexible models of delivery and timetabling arrangements which meet the work patterns of the employers and their employees. For example, the classes observed during the evaluation ranged in duration from an hour and a half to four hours, often to fit around shift patterns and normal working hours, or to accommodate staff who are travelling from their place of employment to their employer's training premises. Four of the five colleges were able to respond appropriately to the demands of the employers in setting up classes within an appropriate timescale. In one college, however, there was a slow start to some of the provision due to staffing issues.

4.3 To help Union Learning Representatives engage their members in addressing their essential skills needs, one of the colleges had worked effectively with the local Union Learning Representatives to develop appropriate advertising materials which included the logos of the union, the employer and the college.

4.4 All of the lecturers were appropriately qualified and most were experienced in working in peripatetic settings. Employers found staffing of the provision most effective when the colleges used a dedicated pool of tutors. These tutors developed good working relationships with the employer and Union Learning Representatives and became familiar with the working patterns of the organisation.

4.5 The attendance at classes is good overall and learners are very positive about their learning experiences. They welcome the opportunity to be taught in discrete groups alongside their work colleagues and at a time and place that is convenient to them. In instances where employees were allowed to attend essential skills classes during their normal working day and were paid whilst attending class, attendance was found to be better. Employees working in the public sector were more likely to be paid whilst attending class than those in the private sector. Some companies were willing to pay the employee whilst attending half of the training session with the employee attending in his own time for the remainder of the session.

4.6 Although college managers are working hard to develop appropriate links with employers, they are finding it increasingly difficult in the current economic climate to engage new companies in offering essential skills to their employees. At the time of the evaluation the Inspectorate visited all but one of the current employers engaged with the colleges. All of the current employers were large companies and most of them had been working with the colleges for a number of years. There was limited evidence that the colleges had made any progress in engaging employers who had previously not provided essential skills provision to their employers, or who were medium or smaller employers.

4.7 Employers often provide oral feed-back to the colleges on the quality of the essential skills provision they provide, however, they are not involved formally in the college's overall self-evaluation of their essential skills provision. The colleges do not monitor the provision sufficiently or provide sufficient feed-back to the unions or employers on the quality of the provision. All of the colleges, in striving for improvement, need to develop better mechanisms to evaluate the quality of their provision in the workplace.

4.8 Colleges use effectively the findings from initial assessment to help them negotiate the duration of the programme with employers. Colleges, however, report that employers often have unrealistic expectations of the required duration of essential skills programmes, and do not take sufficient cognisance of their employees' competence at the start of the programme. Employers frequently expect their employees to achieve their qualification quickly so providing minimum disruption to the workplace.

4.9 The Department has introduced a relaxation of the 40 hour rule, which enables some flexibility for learners to achieve their qualification in a shorter period of time. While the colleges welcome this flexibility there was little evidence of it being used to meet the needs of learners who could complete their qualification in a shorter time.

5. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

5.1 The overall retention rate across the six colleges is good at 86%. One college had an excellent retention rate, four colleges were good and one was satisfactory. However, there is variation across the colleges in the overall retention rate between the classes provided through the colleges' own economic engagement provision which is at 91% and those provided through the Union Learning Fund which is at 80%.

The table below identifies retention rates by skill area and type of provision.

Retention Rates by Skill Area				
	Literacy	Numeracy	ICT	Overall Retention
Economic Engagement	97% (excellent)	85% (good)	89% (good)	91% (excellent)
Union Learning Fund	80% good)	80% (good)	81% (good)	80%(good)
Overall	89% (good)	83% (good)	85% (good)	86% (good)

5.2 Although the overall achievement rates are good at 84% (economic engagement at 80% and Union Learning Fund at 87%), the rates across the six colleges ranged from poor at 54% to excellent at 100%. Three colleges had excellent achievement rates ranging from 100% to 94%, one had good at 81%, one modest at 67% and one poor at 54%.

The table below identifies achievement rates by skill area and type of provision.

Achievement Rates by Skill Area				
	Literacy	Numeracy	ICT	Overall Success
Economic Engagement	83% (good)	84% (good)	68% (modest)	80% (good)
Union Learning Fund	87% (good)	98% (excellent)	91% (excellent)	87% (good)
Overall	84% (good)	88% (good)	80% (good)	84% (good)

5.3 Almost all learners welcome the opportunity to re-engage in education. They demonstrate high levels of enthusiasm, motivation and increased self-confidence as a result of enrolling in essential skills classes. Nearly all of the learners and employers reported that the classes had improved the employees' self-confidence and morale at work, and has helped them to carry out their job function more efficiently. For example, one organisation in completing its own internal evaluation of the provision, through line manager evaluations, commented on the learners new found confidence in contributing to team meetings. In addition, there are examples of learners obtaining promotion to team leader positions as a result of attending essential skills classes. In focus group discussions, learners commented on being more confident in helping their children with their homework and in completing internal application forms for promotion as result of attending essential skills classes.

5.4 Whilst almost all learners are making good progress in their learning, for a small number progress is slow where the findings from initial assessment have not been well matched to their learning need.

5.5 The standards of work achieved are good or better for almost all learners. The standards of spoken and written communication are good to very good and employees are able to talk confidently about their classes and their employment activities. Learners are achieving good standards in their numeracy. Very good standards of work are being achieved in ICT classes for almost all learners.

6. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

6.1 The extent of the provision varied considerably across the six colleges and there is very limited provision in some regions of the province. At the time of the evaluation one college had no provision in the workplace, in another only ICT classes are being provided and in the remainder there is provision for all three skill areas. From the information made available by the colleges it is evident that there is a declining number of learners addressing their literacy and numeracy needs. In addition, existing learners are not being encouraged to progress to address their other essential skills needs. Employers are often unable to release their employees to attend additional classes to address their other essential skills needs and the colleges are not sufficiently proactive in encouraging learners to attend essential skills classes other than in the workplace settings.

6.2 During the evaluation the Inspectorate visited all but one of the employers who are currently providing essential skills for their employees. However, all of the employers visited were in the private or public sector employing large numbers of employees. Currently there is limited provision for employees who are employed by smaller or medium size employers in the province.

6.3 The quality of teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was mostly good or better, with a significant minority (31%) of lessons being very good or excellent, the majority (50%) being good and a minority (19%) being satisfactory. The relationships developed between almost all of the tutors and their learners are very good, and the tutors provide very good individualised support to their learners. The tutors work hard to promote a positive learning environment and to engage the learners, many of whom are returning to learning for the first time.

6.4 All of the classes observed were located in suitable accommodation and included rooms on college campuses, employers' learning centres or on the employers' premises. However, not all of the employers' premises have internet access. This was a particular issue for those tutors delivering the essential skill of ICT. The opportunity for college staff to meet with key technical staff within the organisation prior to the commencement of the class to identify issues, was an example of best practice in setting up the provision. Where colleges are slow to address internet issues employers have been found to move to another provider college which can better accommodate their needs.

6.5 The learning experiences of the learners are mostly well matched to their needs and aspirations. For most of the learners the findings from initial assessment were used well to identify appropriate levels of work. However, for a small minority of learners there was a need to match more closely the outcomes of the initial assessment to their additional learning needs. This is a particular issue where classes are large, where there is a wide variation in ability and where resources and examples of good practice are not shared among tutors working in the same organisation, particularly those who are relatively inexperienced.

6.6 To engage their learners the tutors use, where appropriate, interesting and useful contexts to help the learners to develop their essential skills. The Health and Social Care Trusts and two of the colleges have worked well together to develop and accredit new qualifications that embed the essential skills of literacy and numeracy within the training programme, and which match the Trusts' Knowledge and Skills framework. Currently staff from the Patient Client Support Service are part of this widening participation initiative, with plans to target nursing auxiliary staff in the near future.

6.7 The innovative use of information and learning technology (ILT) to enhance teaching and learning was limited due to the range of venues and accommodation used for the provision. Where the sessions were delivered in the college campuses or in the employers' learning centres there was good use of interactive whiteboards and tutors were increasingly using materials from appropriate online sites to enhance the quality of the programme. However, where the provision is delivered in the workplace access to the internet is very limited, often due to security issues of logging the laptop computers on to the employer's network. In four of the colleges there was limited use of the colleges' virtual learning environment (VLE) to allow learners to work independently at home. In two of the colleges, however, essential skills managers and their staff had worked hard to develop appropriate resource materials that learners can access from the college's VLE both in the classroom and in their own home.

6.8 Almost all of the tutors were very enthusiastic and all were appropriately qualified. However, a minority of tutors were inexperienced in teaching adult learners or in a peripatetic setting.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 The findings from the evaluation indicate that there is good work carried out by those colleges who have engaged with employers in addressing the essential needs of their employees in the workplace. However, the provision across the province is variable, and is mostly limited to larger employers, the majority of which have worked with the colleges for a number of years.

7.2 The quality of teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was mostly good or better, with a significant minority of lessons being very good or excellent. The use of contextualised materials, however, was limited to the partnership work between the Health and Social Care Trusts and the colleges, where the essential skills has been embedded into the Knowledge Skills Framework Progression qualification.

7.3 The overall achievement rates are good at 84%. However, there is a wide variation in the overall achievement rates across the six colleges, ranging from poor at 54% to excellent at 100%; three colleges had excellent achievement rates.

7.4 Almost all of the employers reported that the classes had improved the learners' self-confidence and morale at work, and has helped them to carry out their job function more efficiently.

7.5 All of the colleges have worked very hard to respond to the needs of employers and learners in putting in place flexible models for the delivery of the essential skills. Some employers paid their employees whilst attending class; the attendance at these classes was much higher.

7.6 There was limited use by the colleges of the flexibility available round the 40 hour rule, to fast track those learners, who had been identified through initial assessment as being capable of achieving their qualification more quickly.

8. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

8.1 Despite the good work that is being done by a number of the colleges with a range of employers there is a need to develop strategies to:

- increase the number of learners addressing their literacy and numeracy needs within a workplace setting; and
- address the uptake of essential skills training by new, smaller and medium size employers.

LIST OF EMPLOYERS INCLUDED IN THE EVALUATION

Economic Engagement

1. Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment (DETI)
2. Dr B's Kitchen
3. Belfast City Council (BCC)
4. Belfast Health & Social Care Trust (BH&SCT)
5. Department for Employment and Learning (DEL)
6. Moy Park Ltd
7. Irwin's Bakery
8. Western Health & Social Care Trust (WH&SCT)
9. McColgan's Quality Foods Ltd
10. HCL

Total = 10

Union Learning Fund

11. Translink
12. Royal Mail
13. Sainsbury's
14. ASDA
15. Bombardier Aerospace
16. Langford Lodge Engineering
17. Ormo Bakery
18. DHL
19. HM Revenue and Customs

Total = 9

Association of Sector Skills Councils

20. North West Taxis

Total = 1

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